May 31, 2023

A Cry from the Chopping Block

Dear friends,

We write this open letter to demand the immediate resignation of Tamara Smith from her leadership position at Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company. As secretary-treasurer, Smith has expropriated labor, time, resources, and money from Kerr workers and board members. In so doing, she has undermined the legacy of a venerable press.

This April, in the face of calls for greater accountability, Smith expelled three standing board members and locked out volunteers — without discussion or warning. As long as Smith is involved in Kerr, we cannot support it.

We are writers, editors, radio and podcast producers, and a book designer. Together, we formed the Kerr "revitalization committee" in 2020, and we worked in that capacity until we were abruptly expelled from the press last month. Each of us comes from a long history of radical organizing and publishing, and we represent a range of left political perspectives.

Founded in Chicago in 1886, Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company is one of the world's oldest radical publishers. Kerr was first to translate Marx's *Capital* into English in 1906, and went on to publish many classics of the socialist, anarchist, Black radical, and Surrealist traditions. Today Lucy Parsons's collected speeches remain a bestselling title. This legacy — militant and multiple — represents what Kerr means to us: the best of the U.S. radical tradition.

In Fall 2020, we formed our revitalization committee. We drafted a proposal aimed at connecting Kerr's wealth of radical perspective and experience to the present, and this proposal was readily accepted.

At that time, multiple board members expressed their hope that we could revive the press after a period of dormancy. Though several of us had never previously met, we were happy to support the press, and we worked together for nearly three years. This was a time of transformation and tragedy, characterized by new publications and connections, but also the passing of esteemed board members.

During this time, we published four books, acquired another five manuscripts, produced three long-form podcast episodes, built a social media presence, rekindled interest in the back list, revamped the website, and earned a seat on the board. We put in thousands of volunteer hours. We had big hopes for the future of Kerr.

Then, this April, Tamara Smith informed two board members that they were no longer on the board — *and in fact, never had been*. Smith's rationale was that she had not called a formal vote on their board seats three years earlier; to rectify this "error," she altered paperwork with the Illinois Secretary of State's office to remove them from the press's leadership. Separately, we were informed that the revitalization committee would no longer have a role in the press. Smith ended our initiative by rewriting the organization's bylaws in a meeting that excluded not only the two aforementioned board members, but also our committee's board representative. In total, this was an expulsion of *two-thirds* of the people working for Kerr as of this April.

We believe we were expelled because we demanded greater oversight of Smith. We believe that, as secretary-treasurer, Smith frequently misused the principle of consensus to block any change she personally opposed. Smith also solicited donations to the press from members whose board status was later revoked. These members made contributions in the belief that doing so was part of board membership, which Smith explicitly affirmed in writing. Smith has made no effort to remit their contributions. Similarly, we contributed labor, time, and resources — as well as money — to Kerr projects in progress. Smith expelled us with no thought for these projects, their authors, or our work. We would never have been involved had we known that Smith wished to run and control the press without oversight.

Our group was united by a shared admiration for Kerr's past and promise. This kept us involved in the press despite a series of extremely negative experiences. Once we found ourselves on the chopping block, we felt it necessary to write this letter explaining how egregiously mismanaged the press has become. Above all, we call for Smith to resign immediately, and we advise prospective Kerr workers to avoid the press until she has done so. Please join us in this call for institutional transformation at Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company.

Solidarity forever,

Mia Beach, Bella Bravo, Dakota Brown,
Hugh Farrell, and Zach Sell

ILLUSTRATION FROM "MR. BLOCK" BY ERNEST RIEBE